

## Jerry Harp

### FIDELITIES TO FORM\*

Like countless other writers (some now well known but most of us residing, like the present writer, in some comfortable neighborhood of oblivion), I was fortunate to have Donald Justice as a teacher. This was at the University of Florida, in the last regular-semester writing workshop he would teach before his retirement. Reassuring, clear-eyed, somewhat detached (like a doctor attending to a nervous patient), he conducted our workshop sessions with the kind manners and critical acumen he is deservedly known for. I suspect that his sagacity and manners transfigured our dread into something more like hope or confidence, if not in ourselves then in our decision to be there; we were in the right hands. Justice assured us of what we should do. He would give us no assignments because, since we had come to the writing program, he assumed that we would be reading and writing all the time. We should read poetry in English from all centuries available. We should read poetry in other languages (in the original if possible, if not then in translation) from at least the last two centuries. He gave us a long handout demonstrating an array of verse forms. Throughout the semester he would drop words of advice into our discussions, words of deceptive simplicity. To this day much of what he said is still unfolding itself to me.

Such is the voice that we encounter in Justice's *Oblivion: On Writers and Writing*. Here is a true expert in the tools, techniques, and forms of his craft or art. The word "form" in this context calls for some explanation. Were I simply to assert that Justice, in his critical writing as in his poetic practice, is a master of meter and rhyme, I would only be stating what virtually every reader of contemporary poetry must already know. I should like to focus on Justice's treatment of "form" in the multiple senses in which he uses the term, which touch on, besides the most specific, technical details of a work, its style, tone, and vision—the many characteristics that go to make up its life. As Justice points out in his essay "Benign Obscurity," the particular kinds of difficult writing he focuses on—the twisting of Hopkins's "Spelt from Sybil's

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\**Oblivion: On Writers and Writing*, Donald Justice, Story Line Press, 1998, 135 pages, \$14.

Leaves,” that seems to refer “to some general mood-center”; the plain language only hinting at a predicament “based on a classic story situation” of E. A. Robinson’s “Eros Turannos”—are examples of “what, without reference to the meters and the rhyming, we ought to be willing to call form.”

Yet another sense of “form” comes into play in the volume’s opening essay, “Baudelaire: the Question of His Sincerity; or Variations on Several Texts by Eliot,” in which Justice defines Baudelaire’s “sincerity” as “fidelity to form.” In this context “form” refers to the poet’s characteristic pose or persona, which in Baudelaire’s case is constituted by a coupling of the “paraphernalia of decadence” with a “high moral tone.” Fidelity to form consists, then, in “saying what the form obliges you to say regardless of whether or not you believe in it.” Fidelity does not end here, however, for Justice adds a further and characteristic note of restraint to the formal discipline, the willingness “to espouse what you have felt obliged to say—or to keep decently silent.” He then offers “a more humane version” of fidelity to form: “discovering what you mean by or in the act of saying it.” Fidelity to form thus functions for the writer as both a method of invention and a mode of development.

In other essays in this volume, Justice writes of Philip Larkin’s voice that is by turns brutal and sentimental, a mingling of mordant wit with notes of “plangent bitterness or regret”; and he pays tribute to Weldon Kees, “original in one of the few ways that matter: he speaks to us in a voice or, rather, in a particular tone of voice which we have never heard before.” Kees, who Justice hears as “calm in the face of a certain doom,” also appears in “Oblivion: Variations on a Theme,” where he is joined by “the elegant and cool example” of Henri Coulette, and Robert Boardman Vaughn who was capable in a few all-but-forgotten poems of “great beauty of a certain high romantic kind.” (Justice has edited the poems of both Kees and Coulette and has made Vaughn the subject of several of his own poems.)

Much of the poignance of “Oblivion: Variations on a Theme” arises from the combination of Justice’s sense of the life of the artist as a vocation, with his sense of the tenuousness “of notoriety and riches and such toys.” Justice is very much in earnest that the dedication of one’s life to art is a kind of vocation: “The vows may not be codified and published, but they are secretly known and one does take them. I am perfectly serious about this.” While Justice claims a “romantic view” of this moment of dedication, his restraint and commitment to formal disciplines will lead some to consider him a clas-

sicist. Actually, the example of Justice's work (both his literary criticism and his poetry) is among the best to point out the inadequacy of the old dichotomy between classicists and romantics. His is not a commitment to a set of calcified forms; Dana Gioia has called him a "postmodern classicist," one whose commitment is to a sense of tradition on the move, a tradition of forms that encourage and lend themselves to constant revision, experimentation, and invention.

No doubt, Justice's flexible definition of form fits well with this dynamic sense of tradition. It is important to remember, though, that part of what Justice means by form is the discipline of the line, including the iambic pentameter line, which "comes trailing" its "tradition and precedent." Yet here too the emphasis is on variation. The line is the basic material that the artist works with, shapes, and rearranges. This is the conception of the line that emerges in "The Invention of Free Verse," which features Ezra Pound, in Wabash, Indiana, in 1907, inventing twentieth-century free verse in writing his poem "Cino," tightening up the iambic line by removing unstressed syllables: ". . . if two stresses could be brought together, why not three? From 'Ravens, nights, allurements' only let the slack syllables be dropped," and the experiment yields the line, "Eyes, dreams, lips, and the night goes." Thus did the breaking of the iamb open the poetic line for further experimentation.

Justice's most fully developed essay on prosody, "The Free-Verse Line in Stevens," demonstrates how marvelous an essay on such a topic can be when approached by someone of his depth of understanding. Justice articulates in detail the ways in which Stevens worked with the materials at his disposal, yielding two basic kinds of free-verse line: a relatively short, syntactically shaped, accentual line ("Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock," "The American Sublime"); and a longer line that develops out of the old heroic line by way of a "general loosening process," for the most part through the substitution of anapestic feet for iambic feet, and the variation of line length within a poem ("Esthétique du Mal," "The World as Meditation," "Prologues to What is Possible").

It is also worth mentioning Justice's treatment of the line in his appreciation, for its "purity of style," of William Carlos Williams's "Between Walls." This poem shows, in what is perhaps as close as one can come to an unadulterated instance, a particular conception of the line taken to an extreme—a short line broken across syntax, producing a "lean" and "streamlined" poem that focuses on objects and the relationships the poet sees among them, creat-

ing something that approaches a photographic effect. Of further note in this essay is the way the commentary on the structure of the line becomes also a commentary on the subject matter and effect of the poem. These different “parts” of the poem work together, as the various senses of the word “form” converge in the particular work. This is not to say, however, that Justice indulges in the old fantasy of organic form—far from it. What he offers instead is his understanding of the dynamic workings of “the technology of verse,” the made thing that poetry is—something that exists “at that remove from life which traditionally we have called art.” Someone far wiser than I has said that it is natural for human beings to be artificial. We are makers, and what we make demands “artifice” or “skill” (in Greek *tekhne*, the root of our word technology). While this artificiality has the effect of distancing one from the human lifeworld, it also doubles back on the human lifeworld to make it richer. As Justice writes, one motive for the technology of verse, and in fact “for much if not all art” is “to keep memorable what deserves to be remembered.”

Justice’s intimate knowledge of and experience with the technical workings of language enable him to isolate and discuss very subtle verbal effects. For example, in “The Prose Sublime” he analyzes what it is about some prose of a relatively plain kind (as distinct from purple prose or prose of a self-consciously experimental kind) that makes it successful in producing the kind of “pleasure of the very kind to which poetry is normally thought to have first claim.” One kind of prose sublime, illustrated by a passage from Hemingway, creates a sense that great care is being taken in the writing, such that the presence of the author is felt “in the weight of the words picked out and the rhythms of the composed and modeled phrases.” Of course, the same ought to be said of Justice’s prose. Like his poems, his essays are characterized by a startlingly precise modulation of tone and astute handling of subtle ideas. Such care and precision comes across, for example, in his commentary following up John Crowe Ransom’s refutation of the rather clumsy notion of imitative sound effects in poetry, a notion that becomes strained very quickly, especially when the sounds are claimed to suggest something other than sound, such as spaciousness, softness, or bewilderment. While Justice agrees with Ransom’s critique, he follows with reflections that show his characteristic sensitivity to the materials of his art:

And yet there is something in all this imagined correspondence of sound and sense, even though for the most part, when examined in bald detail, it is clearly naive and unrealistic, based on the sort of simple faith poets are not backward in encouraging, that they are wizards of the language, in control of matters more properly ascribed to chance.

In this sentence the neat and expected dichotomies (correspondence / disparity; wizardly control / sheer chance) break open, hinting at how the opposed terms intersect, or perhaps at how neither term quite applies, allowing subtler notions to emerge. The opening “And yet perhaps,” with its multiple warnings, puts us on notice that we are entering into some difficult terrain and that we who enter should abandon naiveté. Whatever the as-yet-unnamed “something” is that we are to encounter here, we know that we shall not encounter the “naive and unrealistic” version of it. At the same time, we may realize that if poets are “not backward in encouraging” the notion of verbal wizardry, neither should they be forward in encouraging it (otherwise there would be no need for the litotes just quoted). And yet there is something to the idea; even if the bald notion of such wizardry is clearly naive, it would seem that an outright dismissal of it is naive as well. Perhaps the wizardry occurs precisely when the poet takes advantage of chance, so that control and chance occur together. Similarly, the dichotomy concerning imitation yields to something subtler, a kind of congruence perhaps, something like the congruence that Justice refers to in his essay on Philip Larkin’s poem “Coming.” Justice points out that the repetition that occurs in lines ten and eleven in “Coming” (“It will be spring soon, / It will be spring soon—”) “exerts some odd slight power.” While Justice reminds his reader that he is “constitutionally suspicious” of imitative sound effects in poems, he also points out that once he lets his guard down, he sees “what should have been obvious from the start and doubtless has always been so to others. The repeated line is an imitation of the thrush’s song, faint perhaps, as all such imitative effects are, but true. Not that it intends, of course, to reproduce the actual sounds of the bird’s song, but only to stand in for it in a poem by way of a familiar but unexpressed convention.” We get to the moment of congruence by way of the artifice of convention.

Donald Justice is a maker\* who brings vast experience to the art of the essays collected here. Much of what I find amazing about this book is how, without arrogance but with consistent insight and discernment, Justice maintains a dialogue with so many of the figures who have formed our critical heritage, from Longinus to Coleridge to Eliot and Ransom and Blackmur. While Justice is aware of contemporary trends in literary theory and critical practice, he is not bound by them. Rather, he takes up discussion of what he finds important. I'm convinced we shall do well to listen.

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\* It is worth noting that besides writing poetry and essays, Justice writes short fiction, composes music, and paints. In fact, the painting on the cover of *Oblivion* is one of the author's own, though the colors have been rather strikingly altered; for example, what is an expanse of burnt orange on the book cover, is a vivid yellow in the original painting. It should also be noted that the portrait of the author on the back cover of the book is not, as it is listed, a self-portrait; rather, it is a portrait of the author by the artist Dee Clark.